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SUBJECT: BERISHA TO SP: NO MORE MR. NICE GUY

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOHN L. WITHERS, REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: A Democratic Party MP close to PM Berisha told PolOff on November 24 that Berisha reacted very negatively to Socialist Party calls for early elections and was now determined to "respond in kind" to the SP's hard line. The MP told PolOff that the GOA would sponsor its own demonstration in the center of Tirana on December 8 (ostensibly to mark the 19th anniversary of the founding of the student movement that brought down the communist government in 1990.) The MP said that GOA efforts to reach out to the SP since September had been met only with escalating demands and demonstrations from the SP, essentially forcing the GOA "to show its strength and determination." The MP lamented the fact that the DP and SP "will now spend time in futile (political) battles," but described such an outcome as the "inevitable result" of SP intransigence. However, the MP insisted repeatedly that he does not believe any violence will result from the increasingly heated political atmosphere. On November 24, Berisha himself seemed to confirm this harder stance when he vowed "to use the pliers of the law to pull out the teeth" of the SP. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) DP MP Ilir Rusmajli, a longtime contact of PolOff and a generally respected DP moderate, told PolOff that PM Berisha had made a conscious effort since September to remain calm in the face of SP demonstrations and demands that the GOA open contested ballotboxes from the June Parliamentary elections. However, added Rusmajli, SP calls for early elections had angered Berisha and convinced him that the only way to deal with escalating SP demands is "to respond in kind." Rusmajli described DP plans to hold its own major demonstration on December 8 "as a fairly ridiculous move," but said such a reaction was "an inevitable response" to escalating SP demands.

¶3. (C) Rusmajli said that the SP call for early elections had radicalized the DP, which would now take a tougher line with the SP. "We'll now spend time in futile political battles," Rusmajli said. "We tried to compromise, but Rama only became more radical. The PM now feels that the time has come to defend the elections. We will show our power, determination and resolve." Rusmajli insisted that the heated political rhetoric will not lead to violence, and rejected parallels some observers have drawn to 1997, when civil order collapsed across Albania. Rusmajli said he is worried more about the current lack of dialogue between the two parties.

¶4. (C) Rusmajli said the widespread view inside the DP is that SP Chairman Rama took advantage of the DP in the run-up

to the 2007 local elections and that Rama violated every agreement the SP and DP had made in 2006-2007. Rusmajli said the DP would not be so compromising this time.

15. (C) Rusmajli's comments track closely with what the Embassy has heard from other sources in the days following the SP's calls during their November 20-22 rally for early elections - that PM Berisha has essentially decided it is time to push back more forcefully and publicly against SP demands. Rusmajli's claim that a hard-line DP response is "inevitable" is sad, but probably true - Albania's political culture requires, at least in the minds of Albania's political class, that parties fight fire with fire and show no weakness, at least in the early phase of partisan controversies. A tougher DP response at this point probably serves two purposes - it "proves" DP/GOA resolve in the face of SP demands, and also fires up the DP base. Sadly, and to Rusmajli's own admission, in Albanian politics the high road is the road (much) less taken.
WITHERS